

**MR GEORGE CRIBB:
ILLAWARRA'S FIRST CONFIRMED WHITE SETTLER?**

The 1984 book, *Land Between Two Rivers: a historical and pictorial survey of Shellharbour Municipality*, makes many claims for early arrivals in Illawarra. Most of its references are taken from Frank McCaffrey's 1922 publication entitled *The History of Illawarra and its Pioneers*.

McCaffrey's is a wonderful book - full of marvellous early stories and characters - but too often its assertions remain unconfirmed by other sources. The authors of *Land between Two Rivers* are hence a little overconfident in relying on it implicitly. For example, they write that "certainly Joe Wilde accompanied the botanist Robert Brown to the area sometime before 1805" [2] but this furphy had already been confidently dismissed by Bill McDonald on page one of his 1976 publication, *Nineteenth Century Dapto*. [3]

Most bird collectors were gentlemen and could employ lesser beings to do their difficult collecting - as is suggested by a 14 April, 1808, letter from George Caley to Sir Joseph Banks commenting on Illawarra Aborigines who "were said to visit the country near the hill", which some have suggested is a reference to the 'The Jib' at Bowral. [4] Even two issues of the *Sydney Gazette* for May 18, 1806 and July 19 1807 announce that there have been bird collectors active in Illawarra.

It is possible that McCaffrey is right and that "Captain Nicholls brought down Major Johnston's cattle" to graze on the shores of Lake Illawarra in 1803. But there is no primary source to confirm this, although Benjamin Lindsay's exploration of the connections between Major Johnston (as one of the first five land grantees) and Captain Nicholls is quite persuasive. [5]

McCaffrey's reporting that an "Old Timer" says "that cedar was carried from the inner shore of Lake Illawarra" by "small craft during convenient periods to Sydney in 1810 and that bullock teams used to haul cedar logs and planks to the edge of Lake, at suitable centres before any real development took place" [6] is also entirely plausible given the rate at which early commentators remark at the extraordinary disappearance of cedar from the district. Judge McFarland, in his 1872 publication on *Illawarra & Monaro* (but who had access to the oral testimony of a Mr David Smyth of Kiama who had cut cedar in 1821) suggests that cedar cutting near Lake Illawarra started well before 1816. Whatever the precise date of the first arrival of cedar cutters, by 1822 Governor Macquarie could write that cedar "is now very

scarce, most of it already having been cut down and carried away to Sydney. [7].

The real hardships that these early unknown cedar getters and stockmen experienced in such wild and almost completely isolated country is probably beyond our imaginings –although Alexander Harris’s comments that they were “miserably clothed and fed” helps to fill in some of the blanks. [8]

Genuine settlement – though by that is meant absentee landowners employing Stockmen to look after cattle – does get under way just a little before and definitely straight after the Sydney Gazette for 28 September 1816 announces: “The natives at the new settlement at the Five Islands are described as being amicably disposed to us... several gentleman have removed their cattle there, as the neighbourhood offers good pasturage.” Prior to that, in June 1816, Surveyor Meehan had been to the district which he spelt as “Ellawharra” in his field book in the Mitchell Library.

Lieutenant Parker of the 46th Regiment remarks in a report dated 8 May 1816 that he is camped at “the long point” (near Hill 60 at Port Kembla) and has “ordered a bullock belonging to Mr Cribb to be killed and served out to the men.” This indicates that both stock and Stockmen and at least one Overseer, Mr Cribb, had been already sent in advance on the promise of impending grants in the area. [9]

The Sydney Gazette then finally announces on the 16 November of that year that “gentleman and free settlers who have applied for land at “Illawarra or Five Islands” are to meet Surveyor-General Oxley at Throsby’s Hut near what is today Harbour Street, Wollongong, on 2 December 1816. [10] The allocations were to be made by Deputy Surveyor James Meehan. Chief Surveyor Meehan also makes mention of “Brooks farm” in his Field Book and this hints that some clearing and cultivation was already underway on Brooks proposed grant prior to its surveying. [11]

The reference to Mr Cribb, however, clearly takes precedence and Mr Cribb is the first actually named individual associated with permanent settlement in Illawarra verified by a contemporary primary source.

He is thus, in a great many senses, our genuine founding father. His presence in Illawarra almost certainly predates that of Charles Throsby Smith who only arrived in Sydney in April 1816. While he seems to have assisted his uncle Dr Charles Throsby and others to move cattle to the Illawarra during 1816 and 1817, Throsby Smith returned to England during 1818 and did not return until November 1819. After marrying Sarah Broughton in 1822, Throsby Smith makes a decision to settle

on the property where his uncle (Dr Charles Throsby) had erected a hut by November 1816. It is thought that the stockman's hut may have been erected more than a year earlier but there is no primary source confirming this.

Throsby Smith himself only makes the claim he "piloted" Robert Jenkins "down the mountain and he selected near the present site of Mr Jenkin's [William Warren Jenkins] hospitable mansion" at Berkeley. But Throsby Smith seems to get the date wrong (he is writing some 40 years after the event) and says "this was the year 1817" when Meehan had actually surveyed Jenkins Berkeley grant on 7 December 1816.

Charles Throsby Smith explicitly relates in his "Reminiscences of Forty Two Years Residence In Illawarra" (published in the IHS Bulletin May-June 1990) that "Mr George Cribb, the father of Mr Cribb, late a member of the Parliament of New South Wales [sic: neither of the Cribb brothers - Robert and Benjamin - who became politicians were related to George Cribb]" had "brought cattle down" to Illawarra prior to Robert Jenkin's selection and subsequent grant.

Throsby Smith also states that "Mr Cribb located himself near where the Figtree bridge now stands, and the place was called Charcoal Creek, in honour of Cribb's stockmen, an old soldier, who was better known by the name of Charcoal Will than by any other name [IHS Bulletin June 1990, p.43]."

Charcoal Will's real name was actually William Richards, but, unlike George Cribb, he is confirmed as being illiterate by signing his mark during a court case involving the shooting of an Aboriginal boy. Despite his name, Charcoal Will is not an Aborigine. He is an "old soldier" but my telling of his much briefer story will have to wait until another issue of the journal.

The only other contender for earliest identifiable resident of Illawarra is the unnamed inhabitant of Dr Throsby's Stockman's Hut. The only reasonable guess to his identity is to nominate Joseph Wild (who was appointed first constable for the Five Islands on 9 December 1815) as the occupant of that hut.

Whether or not Joe Wild was actually a "resident" constable is unknown. It is possible that he conducted his constabulary of the entire Five Islands from the vantage point of Appin or Campbelltown or even from Dr Throsby's Glenfield residence. Even as late as 1822, the Constable living in closest proximity to present day Wollongong appears to have been Joseph Dransfield who seems to be located

at Appin but is described as "residing at the Five Islands" in the Seth Hawker trial of April 1822

The only hint that the earlier Constable with responsibility for the Five Islands, Joe Wild, may have conducted his business as Constable from Illawarra is a mention he makes in his affidavit concerning the shooting of an Aboriginal boy in 1818. Like Charcoal Will (William Richards), Joseph Wild also signs his affidavit with a cross.

But in that document, Wild also makes the statement that "William Richards alias Charcoal Will came to my hut and asked me to lend my two muskets... The next day Bundle a native came and told me the natives (men and women) at the river [possibly Minnamurra] were all killed, he said a black woman had told him so. It was about 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Next day I went over to Mr O'Brien's [presumably at Merchant Browne's - the Uncle of O'Brien - "Yalla" station near the western shore of Lake Illawarra] and asked him why they had shot the natives who were doing no harm" [See Michael Organ, *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines*, Aboriginal Education Unit, Wollongong University, 1990, p.102, for a transcript of the original].

The distances and time involved in these remarks tend to indicate that in 1818 Joseph Wild was resident in Dr Throsby's Hut at Wollongong Harbour near the corner of present day Smith and Harbour streets. Whether there was then a sufficient population of white people in the "Five Islands" to warrant a full time constabulary presence in Illawarra for the period between 9 December 1815 and the 8 May 1816 is unknown.

And while this detail continues to remain unknowable, the honour of the first documented continuing white presence in Illawarra or the Five Islands should perhaps go, firstly, to the "Mr Cribb" mentioned by Lieutenant Parker in May 1816.

It should, however, be noted that even this verified documentary naming of "Mr Cribb" only really confirms that Lieutenant Parker on that date ordered "a Bullock belonging to Mr Cribb to be kill'd and serv'd out to the men". That particular "Bullock" may actually have been in the care of the person whom Charles Throsby Smith calls "Cribb's stockman...Charcoal Will" or, perhaps, just simply running wild.

As it turns out, however, the life of Mr George Cribb is surprisingly well

documented after the time he is sentenced and transported to Australia. The only period of his life where he rates few mentions in the records of the Colony of NSW is the period 1815-1818.

George Cribb thus emerges as the likely candidate for the title of first identifiable resident of Illawarra.

On 13 April 1818, George Cribb was sentenced to transportation for life for forgery. He seems to me to be a fitting founding father of this disreputable district for he turns out to have not only been a forger and serial bigamist but also as someone with an interesting habit of regularly appearing in colonial records concerning various commercial and social misdemeanours.